

The RISD Museum

Exhibition Notes, Number 16, Winter 2001

*15 Minutes: The Ballad of
Then and Now* Paintings by

David Wayne McGee

December 2, 2001, through March 3, 2002



McGee in his Providence studio.

Part of a long chain: An homage to painting. David Wayne McGee loves painting... He loves making paintings... He loves looking at paintings...

And he wants others to share this love. During the fall of 2001, McGee moved to Providence from his home in Houston, Texas, to be the Art ConText artist in residence. Given the challenge of introducing people at the Olneyville Branch of the Providence Public Library to The RISD Museum, McGee did what he does best: he painted. The following interview with David Henry, Head of Education at The RISD Museum, was conducted in early November, about a month before the paintings were to be hung.

Would you start by telling us exactly what the Museum component of your project is?

I am taking nine or ten portraits from the Museum's permanent collection and replacing them in the galleries with new paintings done in the same style, but of people living here today. Most of the art I've chosen to replace is from the 1500s and 1600s. Those two centuries hold the most drama for me as far as narrative and hidden narrative goes. There is a preciousness and sacredness to that period that is important to me. I can deal with it from an historical standpoint, and I can deal with it from a contemporary standpoint. The narrative is like theatre to me, and I wanted to play with that.

There are some 18th-and 19th-century paintings, too?

Yes, but all of the paintings are portraits. I find that how you "read" portraits is pretty interesting.



A recent work by David Wayne McGee: *Charming Snakes*, 2000.
Image courtesy of the artist.



Three of McGee's subjects (left to right): Toni Garcia, Donnamaria Bruton, and Jenny Culverton.

*Our Curator of Painting and Sculpture has made the point in reference to the reinstalled 19th-century galleries that some of the paintings of people there are not portraits. In Manet's *Repose*, Berthe Morisot is the sitter, but the work is more a study in mood than a portrait of her. Do you have thoughts about that?*

To me, it is a portrait. There is something in the longing of it, something that goes beyond. That is what is great about the painting. Manet took the "objectness" out of her, and she becomes very human, not just a model for an artist. At one point it seems that she forgets that he is even there. She's left that reality for another, and that is the "shot." It is very much a portrait to me. That is what I like about this painting, and what I like about the other paintings I chose. The *Little Bavarian Girl* in Pendleton House has another one of those longing looks that goes beyond.

How did you choose the paintings you wanted to replace? Was it this moment of longing that attracted you?

I chose them for two reasons. There are a lot of paintings in the Museum that have the quality I like, but these paintings had the longing look that relates the past to the present for me. I recognize those looks even in my time. They are timeless. I've personally seen those looks that go beyond the physical into emotional interior things. That is very modern to me. Second, I loved the way that they were placed in the Museum. You have to be ready to look at paintings. You have to approach them in a different way than other objects. You have to come with that little sensitive notion that art has something else. A good painting takes me to a private space, like good jazz. When I am painting, I come to a point where I just don't hear Eric Satie, but I HEAR Thelonius Monk. My brush does something to him. When I walk around in that room with the Manet, it is like a private space. The painter becomes invisible, too. I'm not thinking about him.

How important is it for the people who see your paintings in the galleries to know the Museum's works they are based upon?

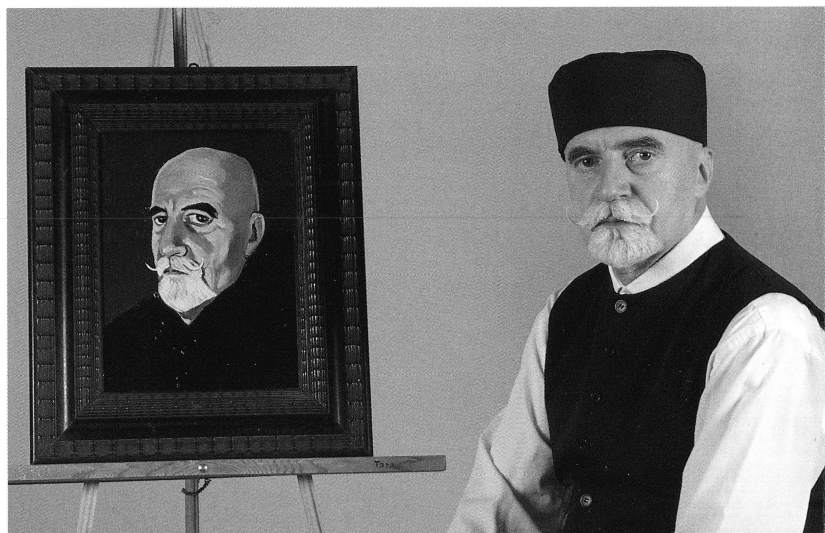
That is not important to me. I want people who have seen the original paintings to realize that this is more an homage: me continuing the tradition. I am part of a long chain of artists. I am honoring these paintings. I was asked yesterday if I were bitter. Am I mad at the originals? Is this a hostile takeover? No. I love the paintings. I want to extend their shelf lives a little longer.

Why did you want to have your work hung in the galleries where their prototypes were, as opposed to having an exhibition in one gallery?

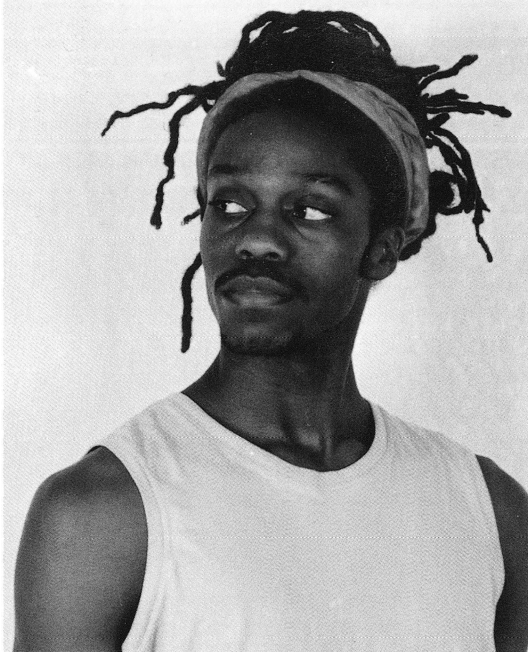
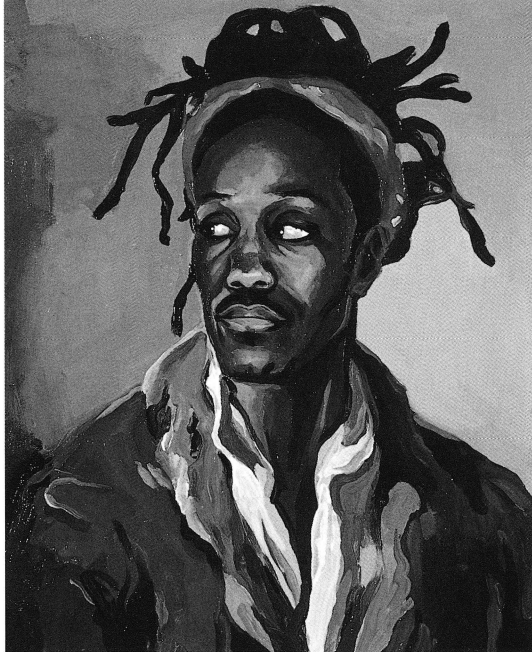
The human factor. To do these paintings and put them into a white cube in a Museum would have drawn a kind of unnatural attention to them. To keep them in the context where they were is to add a kind of longevity to the original paintings. It says these things still happen. Like it or not, we relate to the past as it relates to our lives. I want viewers to see that the people in both the original portraits and my paintings share aspects of their lives today.

How did you choose the people who posed for you?

I chose mine, first of all—because I am a painter—by looks. Who would be interesting to paint? In the end, I am going to be looking at them all the time.



Michael DePetrillo and his likeness as portrayed by McGee.



RISD student Shawn Merchant (right) and his portrait by McGee.

Also, I wanted to paint regular folks. These are real people living their lives and doing their jobs. The way I met them was through real-life situations. I met one in the RISD Bookstore; one was waiting on a table; another was at the Olneyville library; one in the parking lot of the library. When you pitch the show to possible sitters, everything does not go as smoothly as you would like; but that is one of the challenges, to go outside yourself. How do you tell people who may or may not be interested in the whole art experience? How do you explain to them what this is all about without coming off as pretentious?

As with all of the Art ConText projects, 15 Minutes has a strong community component. Yours was organized primarily for the Olneyville Branch of the Providence Public Library. Please explain what happened there.

A lot of people say, "What does the community get out of this? Are you being like Albert Schweitzer trying to do good?" It's not about that. It is about the greater good in ourselves—trying to make our art live in real space as opposed to the Museum construct or the art-school construct. It is not what I am giving to the community, but what the community gives to me. There is no "high" or "low." It is just an even plain.

The eighteen RISD students who worked with me had to extend themselves and their gifts. Each had to meet a new person within a two-block area of the library and get to know them as well as they could, then take their portrait. The photographs have been placed on the façade of the library building as a marketing campaign for humanity.

There are eighteen photo portraits on the front window of the Olneyville Branch Library?

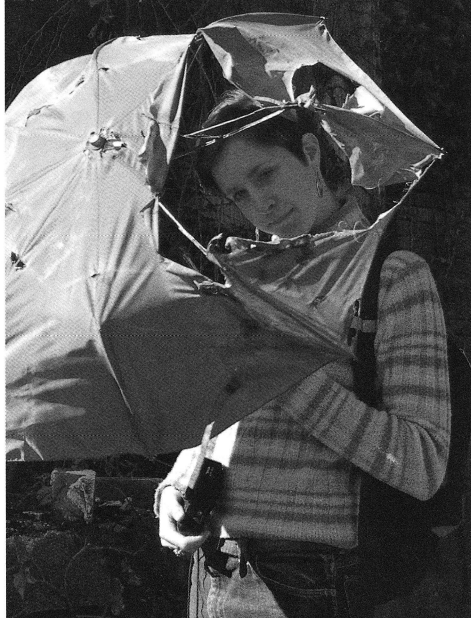
Yes, and hopefully at night we can give it a kind of glow. When you walk into the Library, you will also see works in their preferred media made by the students in response to the people they met. For me, the Library show informs the Museum's installation, and the Museum is part of the Library exhibition. It is all one big gig: the Museum and the Library have so much in common and share some of the same challenges.

How has your experience here affected you as an artist?

First of all, it was very scary. You don't know if you can do it. As I was telling the RISD students, painting is very isolating. It's only you all the time. When you aren't painting, you can hang around with your friends, the people you know. Your community works in a tribal sense, but in a very isolated sense—you don't have to go outside of yourself. When you come to a new place, you have no community, no friends, and you have to meet people. I had to go and ask real people to let me paint them. I tried to rehearse it at first. If the person says this, I will come back to them with this; but nobody ever went by my program. Damn. Some people said NO; and I talked some more and they said NO! It has affected



ABOVE: McGee (right) with friends outside the Museum. BELOW: Constance Small posed for this photograph from which McGee worked.



me because it made me feel very vulnerable. You think you have great skills to communicate any idea, and you realize that you don't have them the way you thought you had.

The community of the RISD students is another experience that I wasn't counting on. I had them to my house for dinner the other day, and we talked about this. Teachers who day in and day out go into a class and draw students out of themselves are incredible. I realized that to get a sense of community in the classroom was the first thing I had to do.

Hanging out at the Library was not as hard as I thought it was going to be, because my work has always been for real spaces around real things. I had a friend who had a show opening in New York at the time of the attacks on the World Trade Center, and she felt that the whole thing seemed very sterile, that the work existed only for itself. She was questioning how art works. I hope my paintings work in real spaces. If I take my ego out of it, I like it much more.

It is important to add that this Art ConText project has given me the chance to put into effect something I and some cats in Houston have been talking about for a long time. I have brought some cohorts—Stanford Carpenter, a cartoonist and anthropologist, and Selven O'Keef Jarmon, a fashion designer—to assist me. This is another kind of community. Stanford is helping me with some research; not to come to conclusions, but to explore. He and I are interested in the issue of responsibility of the artist. Is the artist as responsible as the scientist? As an anthropologist, Stanford has helped me figure out some of the community dynamics.

And out of it all, as the RISD students said the other day, "You do want to make a good piece of art." If it is not a good work of art, the whole project falls down.

As a painter, what role do museums play in your life or career?

I don't think I could have gotten this far if I didn't hang out at museums and libraries. That is why this gig is really good for me. Half of my life has been spent hanging out at libraries, and when I discovered museums, they were just like more libraries. The stuff you want to look at is there. You can just go look at the actual paintings! My main thing is trying to slow down enough to see everything I want to see. If you go to the Metropolitan Museum [New York] or the Kimbell Museum [Fort Worth], or whatever, there is so much stuff to look at. I feel like I have to see everything. I went to Paris once, to the Louvre, and I could not breathe, because the line was like to Mississippi and back, and I was upset because I just wanted to see a couple of paintings. Then I started looking at all the stuff they have on the way to those paintings. They have the Caravaggios in a hallway—like saying, "What's the big deal?" (laughs).

I have a very private reason for loving these things. I am never intimidated by looking at the work. I feel a partnership with the stuff I see in museums. If you want to learn how to paint something, Go Look At It!

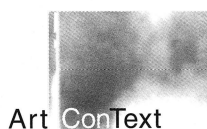
Born 1962 in Lockhart, Louisiana, David McGee currently resides in Houston, Texas. He went to college on a baseball scholarship and received his BFA in 1984. He has had solo exhibitions at the Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston, and the David Beizel Gallery, New York. He participated in Project Row Houses in Houston in 1993.



TOP AND ABOVE: RISD students explore the Olneyville neighborhood as part of their Art ConText project.

Photography: Erik Gould, Steven Oliver

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15 Minutes: The Ballad of Then and Now is the ninth Art ConText project. Art ConText, a partnership between the Providence Public Library and The RISD Museum, is designed to introduce new audiences to contemporary art; to bring art and reading programs to library branches throughout Providence; and to provide opportunities for RISD students to apply their talents. Funding for Art ConText is provided by Pew Charitable Trusts and the National Endowment for the Arts. Additional support for the David Wayne McGee residency has been provided by Mr. and Mrs. I. H. Kempner, III; Motyka Art and Frame; and the Transart Foundation. For more information about Art ConText, visit the web site at www.risd.edu/artcontext.